

## Shopping Cart Power

Women in North America spend a great deal of money. We are privileged shoppers—shopping for groceries without waiting in line, selecting fresh produce year round, choosing from an endless array of products. We are prudent shoppers—reading labels, comparing prices, shopping for sales. Many of us are becoming socially-aware shoppers—choosing products that are environmentally friendly, avoiding goods that are made by corporations that also make nuclear weapons, boycotting products targeted by farmworkers or anti-apartheid groups.

Few of us, however, have considered ourselves **powerful** shoppers. Yet, we do have some influence on the lives of others by the choices we make when we spend money. To increase awareness of ourselves as **influential** shoppers, we need to learn more about the connections between the products we buy and the people who harvest and produce them.

In the past, when we bought a product such as an American car, we could generally be reasonably sure that the price of the car included not only adequate wages for the workers who helped produce the car, but also money to contribute to the workers' health care, retirement, and other benefits. Today, a car promoted as American-made may have at least some parts constructed elsewhere in the world. Because some American products are made by undocumented workers who live in the United States, and many more products are assembled by laborers in Third World countries, we lack assurance that the workers who make the products receive fair wages and benefits. These workers are not protected by unions. Their rights are protected by no one. We are only beginning to understand the exploitation of undocumented workers and Third World laborers. We are only beginning to understand the connections between us, as consumers, and the laborers who produce our goods.

What is the connection between the skirt I buy in a local department store and the women who assembled it in the Dominican Republic? Should I view positively a U.S. corporation that employs people in the Dominican Republic, and be happy there is work for women who might otherwise be unemployed? Should I simply be pleased at the low price I paid for the skirt, the fine-quality construction, and let it go at



that? Have I ever considered whether the women who sew my clothes have adequate care for their children while they work, or whether they are paid fair wages for what they do? Would I be as pleased with the low price I paid if I realized the seamstresses received almost nothing for their labor?

We could ask similar questions about other products in our homes and the food on our tables. The physical distance that separates us—the consumers—from them—the laborers—insulates us from knowing their exploitation. The distance diminishes our knowledge, but it does not diminish their suffering.

The more I study the issue the more complicated it becomes, and I realize I do not know enough about the exploitation of laborers. How can I, as a consumer, spend my money to benefit the Dominican seamstress who made my skirt? How can I, as a consumer, confront the corporations, agribusinesses, and power structures that keep exploitative systems in place? How can I keep from becoming overwhelmed? Is there anything practical I can do to address an issue of such enormous complexity?



In this issue, Kryss Chupp and Patty Wagner share what it means to be exploited workers in developing countries. In other articles, Phyllis Charles, Marilyn Voran, Kathleen Kenagy and Joan Gerig share their awareness of what it means to be members of the global community. Finally, there are ideas for ways we can exercise our shopping cart power to create a more just world for all of God's people.

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by Kryss Chupp

## Coffee or Corn: Doña Catalina's Story

Doña Catalina is 58 years old. When she was 9, her father sold the two small farms he owned and headed for Nicaragua's Atlantic coast, leaving her mother in poor health with seven young children to support. Determined to survive, her mother took up a machete and moved around to different coffee farms looking for work, her children in tow. Eventually they ended up at Santa Luz, a large coffee plantation owned by the Rizo family—the very people who had bought her father's land.

For 10 years, Catalina worked as a maid in the Rizo house while her mother and younger siblings picked coffee on the steep hillsides. She chuckles as she recalls the days when she used to change Israel Rizo's diapers—he is the current owner of the farm. Then, at age 19, she left because she felt she wasn't being treated justly. She received no wages for her work—only her food and whatever clothing and shoes the "Patrón" decided to give her.

Four years later, economic desperation and a small child drove her back to Santa Luz, humiliated, to ask for work. The Rizos accepted her back and gave her the job of cooking for all the other workers. She worked in that kitchen from 4 a.m. till 7 p.m. daily for 22 years. She raised her eight children in that kitchen.

She remembers when the only thing they used to give the workers to eat was pozol, a type of cornmeal mush. "Then the revolution came," she says, referring to the 1979 insurrection that ousted dictator Somoza and ushered in the Sandinistas. With the revolutionary government came many changes in labor codes, etc., and soon Catalina began cooking rice and beans and tortillas three times a day for the workers.

Soon thereafter, Catalina was replaced in the kitchen, so she began to pick coffee with the rest of her family, averaging 60 pounds a day during the harvest season. Nearly 12 years and at least 100,000 pounds of coffee later, Catalina has been laid off. In an economic belt-tightening measure, many of the area's coffee growers, including Israel, say there is no work for the women. As a single head of household, still

...What does the Lord require  
of you but to do justice, and to  
love kindness, and to walk  
humbly with your God?  
—Micah 6:8

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supporting two of her own children and four of her grandchildren, that is very bad news.

Catalina has given nearly 50 years of her life to the production of coffee for international consumption on land that used to belong to her father, and has literally nothing to show for it. I asked her what she would grow if the land were hers. "Food for my children," she said simply. Her biggest worry now is that the Chamorro government, which defeated the Sandinistas in last year's elections, may not respect the revolutionary retirement laws guaranteeing her a liveable pension.

I was curious to know why Catalina had never received land under the Sandinista government's land reform program. "Well," she sighed, "in those days if you wanted land, you had to get organized into a cooperative, and that meant you also had to carry a gun to help defend it against the 'contra' attacks ('counter-revolutionaries' financed by the United States to try to overthrow the Sandinista government in a 10-year war). I didn't want to carry a gun." She was able to get a tiny plot of land in the city of Matagalpa during that time, and, with lots of sacrifice and a generous loan, was able to build a small house, which is extremely important for her now, since the housing she lived in for 50 years is also owned by the Rizos and reserved exclusively for their employees.

Most of the Nicaraguan coffee that we sold in North America came from cooperatives and state farms. But at least 60 percent of the Nicaraguan economy remained in private hands throughout the Sandinista years. Under Chamorro's government, the push for privatization means that many state-held lands are being turned back over to previous owners and cooperatives are under attack, both economically in the form of withheld credit, and as targets for takeovers by ex-contras who are also desperate for land. Many more Catalinas will face very hard times.

Catalina and I reflected on what a Leviticus 25 Jubilee experience would mean for her. If every 50 years, the land was turned back over to its *original* owner (not necessarily synonymous with "previous" owner), she would be able to grow food for her children instead of coffee for export. If European and North American customers would reduce their

dependence on cash crops grown in mal-developed countries, those countries could begin to make different choices for their economic development needs—hopefully more humane ones.

Kryss Chupp worked from 1983-1988 with Synapses, a Chicago-based, grassroots network for justice action and spirituality. Her focus was Central America, which included coordinating non-violent civil disobedience actions to resist the U.S. low-intensity warfare strategies in the region, and selling Nicaraguan coffee throughout the Chicago area as an act of solidarity and a way to educate North Americans about Nicaraguan realities. She is currently on an MCC service assignment in Nicaragua, working in health education with communities in the coffee-growing region of Matagalpa.

speaking out against all forms of injustice contribute to the building of a conscious constituency. Pay particular attention to the exploitation of our fellow and sister human beings that occurs in systems where those who labor have no power.

—Patty Wagner

Let your politics, your vote, your voice reflect an awareness of systems that oppress and exploit. Standing up and

by Patty Wagner

## Pagsunog-Kilay

*(a Tagalog word for when you stay up late, so caught up in what you are writing that you burn your eyebrows on the candle's flame)*

America seems a little far away tonight. I find myself so caught up in life here in the Philippines that it is hard to put myself in your place. The texture of your lives escapes me.

Today a national strike was launched by the labor unions together with people's organizations from a broad political spectrum. The city was paralyzed—hardly any public transit, no one going to work. The organizers want the government to grant an increase in the basic wage and to deal with the very difficult economic crisis in ways that do not destroy the country.

The demand for a living wage means something to me now that it did not before, because I just finished working in a factory in the working-class district of Manila. It was just about the scariest thing I have ever done: walking around the factory district, knocking on gates, talking to security guards, asking for work. I looked ridiculous: a white person asking for factory work. But I kept applying and asking and taking I.Q. tests and sewing tests, realizing along the way that this is how new immigrants to America feel when they apply. I stood in line with everyone else, waited in the hot sun, cowered under the glare of supervisors, and got a lot of stares. I was in the process of failing a sewing test at a garment factory when the Taiwanese manager saw me, and said he would hire me to teach English to his Taiwanese assistants and give me a job in the factory as well.

The first day I was taught basic stitches and practiced them. By the second day, I was making appliques of silk on silk and sewed one nearly perfectly. When the supervisor saw it, she nodded, spoke to the line leader, and I got my first production job, sewing together the shoulder pads. I felt the pride of craftship and mastery, quickly followed by the realization that now the exploitation had begun. I also wanted to take that piece of applique home, but it was whisked away.

There was joy in learning a craft: controlling hands, feet, and knees to work the machine, learning the machine's temperament, making it do what I wanted.

Most things, of course, we do not control, like what to sew and how to sew. We are told when we start work and when we can go home. We are told when a holiday is a holiday and when it is a work day. The employers hold the contract. They have the administrative, accounting, and managing skills. They are the designers. We are the producers. We take the material and create wealth for them.

The very nice Taiwanese technical assistant in the sampling section where I work demands perfection. We are creating the samples that will go to the buyers. At first I am stimulated by the challenge to create something fine. They are patient with my early mistakes and help me rip out piece after piece. But then it strikes me—they are demanding perfection, but they pay slave wages. If they expect artistry, they should pay for it. Daisy has sewn for fifteen years, and she started at this factory three months ago at 89 pesos a day. After 15 years of experience! Even I felt this exploitation. One morning I looked at the clock. It was 9 a.m. I had been awake since 4:30, working since 6, and still had nine hours of work to go. And they want perfection! I thought of the underpaid cooks who spit in the soup, the assembly line workers who add a glitch just to protest the assumption that they accept this demand.

The nice Taiwanese supervisor comes in two hours later than we do, but works hard, usually till 7 p.m., including Sundays. But she is compensated for her efforts; the workers are not. She works in air-conditioned surroundings and goes home to cooked meals and clean clothes. The thousand workers share three broken toilets and stifling heat. What right do these "nice" people have to demand perfection, speed and promptness from these women? It is their money that gives them power.

Still, I found that I liked getting up, cooking my breakfast and getting out the door by 5:20. I was glad to develop my sewing skill. But more, I felt in perfect synch with my surroundings. Like the other workers, I had to scurry along the street to find a Taytay jeep. I had to punch in by 6 a.m. or get a deduction. I had to work till I dropped into a dead sleep on my bench at breaktime. My education, travel, and skin color did not block the basic identity of "worker." For the first time that I can remember in this country, I felt absolutely no sense of alienation. I wasn't just in solidarity with the workers, I was a worker. I wasn't just hearing about oppression. I, too, was experiencing it.



I sat down at my machine and concentrated on my work. I enjoyed the physical focus of my work — the focus on fabric, texture, lines and shapes rather than on words and concepts. I felt the dignity of my work. Yet, I realized I was being a “good worker,” making “sip-sip” to please my bosses. I was reassured that everyone does this at the beginning. It takes a while before one shuts off the machine as soon as the bell rings.

We work day shift: 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. The night shift works 6 p.m. to 6 a.m. There is a break at 8:45 for 15 minutes. As soon as the bell rings, we switch off the light and lie down on the bench to sleep. At 11 we have an hour break till lunch—half spent eating, half sleeping. Then another 15-minute break at 3 p.m. before overtime starts.

At 2 p.m., Angie, the line leader’s assistant, comes to each of us and has us sign the paper saying we are working from 3 until whatever time they have decided. For me it was generally 5 because I taught in the evenings. For the rest of the workers, usually 6.

I thought that Sunday was only a workday for those who wanted extra pay. I asked people if they would be working on Sunday. They seemed surprised when I inquired. “If there is ‘basok’ (work), then yes,” they said. Linda, who sat on the bench behind me, said, “You mean you won’t work on Sunday?”

“You mean we have to work?” I asked. “Well, no, but your ‘performance’ is affected,” she said.

It seemed as though people had forgotten about Sunday, but then Daisy, who sat at my left side and who lost her job sewing Barbie clothes at Mattel when the workers formed a union, suddenly said, “Sunday should be God’s day, I guess.” It wasn’t that she and the others in their matter-of-factness had forgotten that Sunday was to be a different sort of day. It was that feeding their kids and keeping their jobs took precedence.

What is mandatory is what the management wants or what the market demands, even if it is not “required” or legal. And so, we work 6 to 6, Monday to Friday, 6 to 3 on Saturday and 6 to 2 on Sunday, then back to regular hours on Monday.

Many of the workers in my section had moved together from the Greenfields garment factory that closed down when a KMU-affiliated union was organized. I heard the same story again and again. As soon as workers try to negotiate for fair wages and conditions, the companies shut down.

So the workers work every day, wearing out their eyes and hearts to produce wealth for the Taiwanese and Americans. These women have no memory of leisure—of lazy breakfasts, languid afternoons, late-night parties. Yet here they are, creating party clothes for American women. They are sewing long-sleeved Christmas-season blouses: black satin with gold trim, creamy silks shimmering with hand-sewn beads. Those who sew these elegant things will never know leisure. They will never attend such parties. They will never own such clothes.

He has put down the mighty  
from their thrones, and exalted  
those of low degree; he has  
filled the hungry with good  
things, and the rich he has sent  
empty away.

—Luke 1:52-53

There is an advertising slogan, “Who is a Leslie Fay Woman?” that runs in American women’s magazines. Usually there are six full-page glossy photos, each a portrait of a woman beautifully coiffed, at ease in front of a Southern mansion, in a chic New York apartment, or on a quaint New England street, all looking utterly rich. I remember staring at these photos some months back, taken by the perfect images.

And now I see the women who create those clothes. They wear simple cotton, worn and neat. They earn three to four dollars a day for 12 hours work. They leave their homes before sunrise and arrive home after dark. They barely see their children, or their husbands, who are also working overtime. They work every day of the week; no time for strolls in the park and for concert halls. The poor women sit, and with tired hands, create beautiful clothes for the relatively rich. The clothes are tagged before they leave the factory door. The black satin is \$48, the silk is \$89—two to three weeks’ pay.

I wonder: what if these women were free to let their spirits create, what would they make? Mourning clothes? Wildly colorful blouses? Play clothes for their children? What if these women owned the factory? What hours would they give themselves?

I sewed labels for a whole day, attaching the size and care tags to a “Susan Hutton” label. You might want to look at a label on a good shirt or blouse. Look at the stitching. I had to sew a straight 1/16th-inch seam along the lower edge, then stop the machine at exactly the right place, tuck in the size label, turn the wheel by hand to make sure the tag didn’t drop, then attach the care label exactly flush with the size label, sew it on perfectly straight, then sew across the bottom of the label to the other side. If the seam became 1/12th-inch or if the tags were uneven or not perfectly centered, I had to do it over again.

When I got home that night, I looked at the label on my nightgown. I saw the stitched-all-around-the-label “Lindsey Blake Intimate” and the care tag “100% cotton. Made in India.” Immediately, I imagined the woman who sewed this label, sitting at an old machine like mine, sewing her good, straight stitch, using her scissors to clip the thread right there, and there. I looked for a wandering stitch and found a small place on an inside seam where the machine strayed a bit, and I smiled: “There you are. You, who could never afford this beautiful nightgown, who work long hours and bring home food for your children. Hello, hello. I feel you in this nightgown. I sew labels, too.”

I talked with Julie, a woman who works at a factory that makes clothes for “The Gap” label. She talked about working with the fine quality cotton cloth, sewing the slit between the front and the back on T-shirts with the long-backed style. She had crossed her feet while removing some stitches—taking that opportunity away from her foot pedal to stretch her ankle—and was reprimanded by her supervisor. She was also yelled at when she laughed or spoke to those sitting with her. And she was required to work seven nights a week unless she had a special excuse.

After her first week, Julie was exhausted. As she told me her stories, her throat caught with anger and fatigue. She broke down in sobs. I sat beside this woman, holding a pillow to her face to catch the tears, a woman I had never known to weep, and thought, “I want to remember this moment for the rest of my life.” This woman who makes “Gap” clothes—clothes that are supposed to make you feel free and casual—who weeps from the pain of work, who is not even allowed to cross her ankles.

I talked to members of my family on the phone and I talked about Julie and “The Gap.” Dad asked what we could do. He was going to a board meeting of a publishing house and would check into the working conditions of those who make the books in Hong Kong. We talked about pressuring the World Bank not to put such tight levels on minimum wages in countries with big debts.

Maybe the most important step is to realize that many products are made with sweat and tears. That companies are getting rich off the profits from the suffering of the poor and powerless. That the poor have the right to organize, as they have done in America, to keep their working conditions human. That this is what a lot of revolutions are about: The Gap.

Patty Wagner, born and raised in Ohio, served under MCC in the Philippines from 1980-83. After four years back in the United States, Patty returned to the Philippines to work as a staff member of an institute promoting a people’s democracy. In 1990, she joined a predominantly Catholic community called Calama that lives and works beside workers and peasants exploited by a profit-centered economy. Patty spent two weeks with the factory workers (the experiences that prompted her article), before moving to her present assignment in the rural province of Aurora. Here, she works beside the women in the field and with their organization, The Union of Peasant Women of Aurora.

**"What does 'work' mean to someone in a foreign-owned assembly plant in Mexico, a U.S.-owned garment factory in Turkey, or in any transnational corporation in the countries of Central America, Asia, and increasingly, Africa?"**



## **Work— Opportunity or Exploitation?**

Patty's experience is not an isolated incident. Her story could be retold in dozens of languages by workers in many different countries. Her story depicts work in one of many transnational corporations (TNCs).

"Transnational corporations." The words sound harmless. They simply describe corporations that operate in more than one country. The words may even convey a positive image:

employment opportunity for people around the world—the opportunity to provide necessities and luxuries for oneself and one's family, and the opportunity for the fulfillment work gives to one's life.

But there is another view of work that we North Americans must open our hearts and minds to see. What does "work" mean to someone in a foreign-owned assembly plant in Mexico, a U.S.-owned garment factory in Turkey, or in any transnational corporation in the countries of Central America, Asia, and increasingly, Africa? For many poor and powerless people, "work" means exploitation.

According to *The Global Factory* by Rachel Kamel, a study published by American Friends Service Committee, U.S. manufacturers faced increased competition from Japan and Europe in the 1960's and 1970's. At the same time, U.S. labor unions and labor protection laws became more effective. Consequently, the cost of American-made goods increased. To maintain their market position, U.S. firms had to reduce production costs. The simplest way to cut costs was to reduce the cost of labor, and the easiest way to do that has been to move production operations out of the United States. Thus, corporations became transnational. The electronics and garment industries have been joined by a variety of labor-intensive industries (footwear, plastics, toys, electrical products, automobiles, etc.), as well as the newest operation: data entry. Today, TNCs from the United States, Japan, and western Europe are more powerful than many national governments.

Often, Third World governments welcome TNCs as a source of jobs not available in the local economies. Kamel notes that host countries grant many concessions to TNCs. They are often exempted from import and export tariffs and allowed duty-free access to raw materials and equipment. Corporations may be given tax holidays of five to 15 years, during which time they do not have to pay corporate income taxes to local governments. Environmental regulations may be relaxed; as a result, whole communities sometimes suffer toxic exposure.

The primary reason for TNCs to relocate in Third World countries, however, is to take advantage of cheap labor. In many places, people have traditionally been farmers, but as transnational agribusinesses take over more and more land for export crops, fewer people are able to survive by farming their own land. Consequently, more and more people travel to the cities to find work. Because local economies are not well developed in the cities, work there is scarce, too, and people

are forced to take what jobs they can find. TNCs located in the cities have a seemingly endless supply of laborers.

Once hired to work, individual workers endure many hardships. Labor rights may be non-existent or restricted. Working conditions may be severe: production is often sped up from U.S. standards by 25 percent or more. Working hours are increased by an average of 50 percent, and health and safety concerns are ignored. The labor pool is predominantly young women and girls, whose work is undervalued. *The Global Factory* reports that workers for TNCs in the Third World receive wages ranging from \$2.12 per hour in Taiwan to 40 cents per hour in Mexico.

Some may argue that TNCs bring jobs and development into Third World countries. Kamel notes that "TNCs do create large numbers of jobs, and they bring new technology to their host countries." However, for most workers, jobs never lead to occupational advancement; workers are replaced when they are no longer productive. TNCs usually do not stimulate growth in local industry because components of products are imported and final products are exported. Most often, profits are generated only for the TNCs and a few local elite; wealth is never shared fairly with the workers who create it.

A difficult question recurs: Isn't any job, no matter how low-paying, better than no job at all? That question can only be answered by the workers themselves. We North Americans are left with the question of what to do about transnational corporations and other exploitative structures. We may not have answers, but we need to struggle with, not ignore, the question.

Much of the information for this article comes from Chapter 1 of *The Global Factory: Analysis and Action for a New Economic Era*, by Rachael Kamel, American Friends Service Committee, 1990. This excellent book provides documented information about the history and development of TNCs, as well as information about how working people are affected by TNCs, particularly in the United States, Mexico, and the Philippines. The book also gives practical ideas for response, including a chapter on "Starting a Discussion-Action Project," and lists additional resource materials.

by Marilyn Voran

## On Taking a Few Steps in the Right Direction

In her preface to *Living More with Less*, the late author Doris Janzen Longacre asks prayerfully, "How can I help unconvinced people see that their lives really do affect the lives of the poor?" In her writing, Doris taught us that healing the blindness inflicted by the false values of our over-consuming society is a spiritual journey to a deepening union with God. God judges "the poor fairly and defends the rights of the helpless," Isaiah 11:4. In this article, I offer some reflections on this journey as I have experienced it.

I like to think that I was not so much unconvinced as simply unaware of my connections with the lives of the poor. The latter sounds like a lesser indictment, but it really comes down to a matter of what one chooses to pay attention to, how much effort one makes to be informed about world conditions, and how open one is to see with God's eyes—truthfully and lovingly.

God called me to this journey about 11 years ago when I was invited to join the Goshen (Ind.) Area Hunger and Social Concerns Committee, an ad hoc group of local home







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economists, which had a networking relationship with Mennonite Central Committee (MCC). Our mission included addressing local needs and serving as resource people for world hunger workshops as requested by churches in the area and in surrounding states. Many of the women in the group had lived and worked overseas with MCC or in other positions and had firsthand experience with poor and hungry people in Third World countries. I wondered what I, who had never traveled beyond North America, had to offer in such a group.

It was a time when people were beginning to understand that there was something wrong with the standard American diet—that it was taking a toll on our health as well as using far more than our share of the earth's food resources. Because of my interest in foods and nutrition, I accepted requests to give presentations on the "more with less" theme. I enjoined participants to eat more simply: less sugar, fat and meat; more whole grains and legumes. It was a different style of eating that would benefit health while consuming less of the earth's food resources. Money saved by adopting a simpler diet could be directed to relief and development projects to help alleviate world hunger.

However, I began to suspect that this teaching, though valid, was missing an important element. Yes, emergency relief is important—give people fish so they can eat today. Development is crucial—teach people how to fish so they can eat for a lifetime. But what about the people who did not have access to the fish pond?

MCC stories told about hungry Haitian peasants farming unproductive hillsides, while the more fertile valleys grew crops for North American supermarkets. I heard of Philippine families, living in crowded shanties in Manila, who had once lived simply, but with dignity, on their small farms. They were removed from their land and their houses were bulldozed to make room to grow crops to export to North Americans. I learned that workers who were hired to produce export crops were seldom paid enough wages to provide adequate housing and food for their families. I read about corrupt and oppressive governments, eager for revenue from foreign trade, allowing huge, multinational companies to maximize profits by operating in unjust ways that hurt the local population.

The result is, that through food production as well as in other economic activity, the poor of the world subsidize the comfortable lives of the wealthy. Radios assembled in

Taiwan by workers paid less than 25 cents an hour, clothing sewn in Costa Rica by people earning 40 cents an hour, poor Bolivian miners providing tungsten for our light bulbs, rubber from Thailand which has a per capita yearly income of \$528 (how many pairs of designer athletic shoes would \$528 buy?) are just a few examples of our dependency on the labor of the poor of the world.

I chose to focus on our North American food production system and its connections with Third World hunger and poverty because food is so basic to life. Food is a constant reminder of God's gifts from the earth and of God's intention that the gifts be shared by all people. Grocery shopping took on a new meaning. It became more than a matter of shopping with nutrition and economy in mind. Walking several hundred feet down the aisle of the supermarket put me in touch with farm laborers and their poor families thousands of miles away. I began to question my food buying. Who benefits and who gets hurt by what I buy? Are the plantation workers paid a fair wage for producing the bananas and pineapples I enjoy at a relatively low cost? Are some Central American children malnourished because land which once grew corn and beans for the local diet now grows vegetables I "need" for a tossed salad in mid-winter? I began to add justice to my shopping list.

Our food system not only makes us a part of the world hunger and poverty problem, but also victimizes us as consumers. Imposed upon us are increased and unnecessary processing, exposure to chemicals of questionable safety, foods lower in nutrition, constantly-rising prices, and environmental damage. Adding justice to my shopping list means making deliberate choices about how much I participate in this food system. I see my buying choices as votes for values I hold important, as ways to care for people and for God's earth. Shopping with justice in mind can mean some inconvenience and additional expense, but is a way of living more consistently with the values I hold important.

Understanding that our lives really do affect the lives of the poor can be a liberating experience. This understanding helps us to unmask the illusions and phony claims of our consumer culture. Jesus taught his disciples, and continues to call us, to detach ourselves from possessions and wealth.

Sometimes, however, the pragmatic part of me wonders about results. It is not clear that my choices to refrain from buying certain products puts more food on the plates of the poor. It is not evident that the effort of writing *Add Justice to Your*

**We are not called to be  
effective, but to be faithful.**

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*Shopping List* changed any decisions of multinational companies. Regarding the questioning of results, Thomas Merton in *Letter to a Young Activists*, offers this insight:

Do not depend on the hope of results. When you are doing the sort of work you have taken on... you may have to face the fact that your work will be apparently worthless and even achieve no result at all... As you get used to this idea you start more and more to concentrate not on the results but on the value, the truth of the work itself.

The real hope, then, is not in something we think we can do, but in God who is making something good out of it in some way we cannot see. If we can do God's will, we will be helping in this process. But we will not necessarily know about it beforehand.

Taking care to "do justice" in our food choices seems to me a reasonable way to seriously live our prayer, "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:10). God's spirit will lead each of us to take additional steps as God intends: joining a boycott, speaking out against support of oppressive governments, or advocating for the poor in one's community. The hope and joy in the journey are not in seeing results, but in the participation in the struggle for justice at whatever level one is called.

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by Phyllis Charles

## Boycotting: A Way of Remembering

As I sit down to think of reasons why I boycott, I find it is easier to think of reasons not to boycott. First, for one to participate in a boycott with integrity, shouldn't one be able to demonstrate that the boycott has a reasonable chance of achieving its purpose? I should be able to demonstrate that my not purchasing grapes will ultimately benefit the farm workers, that not buying Folger's coffee will aid the peasants and those struggling to end the war in El Salvador, and that not purchasing Coca Cola will aid in the fight against apartheid. If I can't demonstrate that a boycott is potentially effective, should I boycott? Are the boycotts in which I participate effective? I'm not really sure.

A second reason not to boycott is related to the first. Before I participate in a boycott, I should be able to satisfactorily answer questions which may be raised in relation to the boycott: "Are you sure this isn't hurting the very people it's intended to help?" "Did this boycott originate in South Africa or in the parent company in Atlanta?" "What about the split between the California and Texas farm workers? I heard that not all the farm workers even support the boycott."

Last summer, as I stood in front of a small grocery store on the north side of Chicago handing out fliers encouraging passersby not to shop at the store because of its manager's refusal to take Folger's coffee off the shelves, I was stumped by some of the questions raised: "What percent of Folger's coffee is produced in El Salvador? Don't other companies also purchase coffee from El Salvador—why not boycott them, too? Is this really helping the people of El Salvador?" I also questioned whether I was contributing to the demise of a local small business because the larger food chains were too large to target at the beginning of the Folger's campaign.

If I am not able to satisfactorily answer the questions raised in my own mind—never mind the questions raised by others—should I boycott?

**Report Seeking  
Book Reviewers**

We plan to include reviews on selected books in future issues of *Women's Concerns Report*. We will include books by Mennonite authors on women's issues, and books by Mennonite women on theological topics. If you are interested in being on our list of potential review writers, please contact Kristina Mast Burnett, *Report* editor.



Third, if a person says he or she is going to do something, that person should live up to his or her word 100 percent. I've always heard statements such as, "If you can't do a job right, don't do it at all," or "What kind of a witness will you be?" or "People are watching what you do, not just listening to what you say." I felt my credibility would be doubted, my integrity destroyed if I talked about a boycott and was seen breaking it before the call came to end it. And I know I've bought Coke, have eaten California grapes, and have unknowingly drunk Folger's coffee since I started boycotting these products. Since I know I'm not perfect at anything and cannot possibly be totally consistent in my buying patterns, should I boycott?

With all my unanswered questions, I continue to boycott. Why? Soon after the launching of thousands of U.S. SCUD missiles which devastated Iraq, my pastor preached a sermon about resistance to evil and to the war. He said something I will not forget: "We will object... without the need to be

heard and we will resist without the need to be effective." Christ calls us to resist evil in our world, not necessarily to achieve success or to be effective. This is true as well, I think, in relation to boycotts.

I boycott because every time I eat out with a friend and ask for something other than Coca Cola to drink, I remember my brothers and sisters struggling for freedom in South Africa. Every time I pass up a Folger's coffee, I remember my sisters and brothers in El Salvador and remember the horrible war perpetrated there by U.S. tax dollars. Every time I pass by the grapes in the produce section of the store, I remember the farm workers slaving long hours and risking health problems from toxic pesticides.

Boycotting is, for me, a way of remembering I am not alone on this planet and I am not alone in my resistance against evil. Boycotting is a personal communion, a small token of sharing in Christ's suffering and the suffering of my sisters and brothers around the world. To paraphrase the words of Christ, "As often as you don't eat these (grapes) and don't drink the (coffee or Coke), so do in remembrance of me." This is why I boycott.

**Phyllis Charles is a social worker in the pediatrics unit of Rush Presbyterian St. Luke's Hospital/Medical Center in Chicago, Ill. She attends Oak Park Mennonite Church just outside of Chicago. Phyllis visited El Salvador in 1986 and has been involved with several peace and justice groups, including Synapses, which she credits with making her increasingly aware of how our lifestyles can affect others.**

"I believe it could be said that  
boycotting is a form of prayer."

by Joan Gerig

## Why I Boycott

My decisions to boycott have been based on friendships. One of the first boycotts I joined followed an encounter with Chilean exiles, who patiently explained to me why they were forced to leave their country and why, as a result of the human rights violations there, they asked me not to buy Granny Smith apples from Chile. It was easy to refrain from buying any Chilean product after that.

The following year, Orlando and I went to Botswana to work with young exiles from South Africa. The high school-aged youth were very clear that the apartheid government, which killed many of their friends in the Soweto Uprising, had to be removed. They also reminded us, that, as North Americans, we had a role to play in getting rid of apartheid. As a result of listening to them talk of their experiences under apartheid, I am now a full-time anti-apartheid organizer. Not only do I boycott—I organize others to join in!

People often ask me if I'm not hurting South Africans by boycotting South African products. Yes, I am. But the request for the boycott came from them—it was not my idea. If they asked us to boycott, why should we decide not to do so because it is hurting them? This question of "Isn't it hurting them?" is asked by well-meaning people so many times. I recall a confident South African woman answering an American businessman who was so concerned about the blacks losing jobs because of boycotts. Her simple answer was, "The higher you are on the ladder, the further you have to fall."

Boycotts and sanctions in South Africa are affecting the white business community, which has a great deal more to lose than the blacks it employs. Yes, there are some black South Africans who say the boycotts are hurting their people. I, too, have heard them, but it is always good to understand who is speaking. Often, it is someone employed by the government who makes the charge.



Therefore, our car does not run on Shell Oil (the largest importer of oil into South Africa), nor do we purchase Coke (including Minute Maid products), since that, too, is a large American company profiting from apartheid. We do not claim to be pure. There are many companies still doing business in South Africa and we have not always been consistent in not supporting them. But we do support organized boycotts because we believe that boycotting is a nonviolent way to bring about change. It is a good reminder that not everyone is free. When we pass a Shell station on the Interstate with an almost empty tank of gas, or we kindly refuse Coke, we remember our many friends in South Africa still fighting apartheid and breathe a prayer for them. I believe it could be said that boycotting is a form of prayer.

**Joan Gerig lives in an African-American community in Chicago, Ill. with her husband Orlando and 10-year-old daughter, Tasara. Joan works at Synapses, a Chicago-based justice and action organization, and she also gardens with her neighbors in a community garden.**

"I read about food companies that also have military contracts. I realized that by buying products from these food companies, I would be indirectly supporting the military."

"When you are involved with others—learning from them, helping them—you forget about things you'd like to have in your home."

by Becky Schenck and Kathleen Kenagy

## A Conversation about Connections

**Becky:** When did you begin to realize that other people in the world are affected by the products you buy? What has influenced you to think more globally?

**Kathleen:** I think what really made me start thinking was realizing how much of our taxes went to the military. [Kathleen and her husband, Ben, have not paid the military portion of their income taxes since 1970.] Then I learned how different companies have military contracts—I think that was the thing that got me started. I came across a book called *Rating America's Corporate Conscience*. I read about food companies that also have military contracts. I realized that by buying products from these food companies, I would be indirectly supporting the military. So, at first, in changing my buying habits, I thought more about how food companies and the military were connected, rather than thinking how buying certain foods affected the people who produced them.

Of course there's no way you can be 100 percent pure in your buying. If you watch the paper, you realize that companies are constantly changing ownership. For example, here's an article on the buy-out of Kraft Food by Philip Morris, a tobacco company. By not paying a portion of our income taxes, I don't willingly support the military arm of our government directly. But, on the other hand, I might unknowingly buy products from a company that does support the military. And how my buying affects women in Third World countries, I'm not always sure.

**Becky:** I think it's not just women, but how our buying affects all poor people in other countries. The poor in El Salvador are affected by North American coffee consumption and by our income taxes, some of which go to El Salvador as military aid to keep the present system in place. I think we have to challenge ourselves by asking, "Is there something I can do to make a difference?"

**Kathleen:** One way I feel I can make a difference is by selling SELFHELP crafts. Some of the SELFHELP

cooperatives are family businesses, some include both men and women workers, and some are made up entirely of women. Right now there are SELFHELP projects in more than 35 developing countries. MCC sometimes loans money to start the co-ops and to provide job training. Sometimes the co-ops are already established and MCC markets the products. Workers are paid fair wages for their work; they are not exploited. Buying products from SELFHELP means that you are helping to support people to live with dignity—helping them to provide for their own schooling, clothing, and medical care.

**Becky:** Are there other ways we can better identify with poor people in our world?

**Kathleen:** I think we need to be more knowledgeable of what is going on in other countries, and then to live as simply as we can. Here's an example of how difficult it is, though, in practice. We'd like to have a window put in at the top of our stairway because our stairway is so dark. And I have to think: "Can we really conscientiously spend money on that when people don't even have houses, just because I want a little bit more light in there?"

When we came back from Puerto Rico in 1959, I had to adjust to the way people were living and the materialism. I guess I said a number of things to friends, and finally somebody said to me, "But this is not Puerto Rico, this is the United States." And when we were in Puerto Rico, another person said to me, "In order to help people upgrade their living standard, we should stay one notch above, so they try to come up to a better level of living." I could never quite understand how I could justify doing that.

I think one way to be more content with having less is to be involved in activities. When you are involved with others—learning from them, helping them—you forget about things you'd like to have in your home. You concentrate on other things.

Kathleen Kenagy and her husband Ben live in Eugene, Ore. They are parents of two grown daughters. Kathleen first served an MCC term in Akron, Pa. in 1948. She and Ben have also served terms with Mennonite Board of Missions in Puerto Rico and Israel. Kathleen is involved locally in the SELFHELP program and in the office of Habitat for Humanity.



## Women in Ministry

- **Anne Kauffman Weaver** was installed as youth minister at Blooming Glen (Pa.) Mennonite Church on June 30.
- **Konstance and Raymond Bell** were licensed as co-pastors of Bethel Mennonite Church, Chicago, Ill., on May 5.
- **Shirlee Yoder and Brian Boettger** were licensed as pastoral team members at Park View Mennonite Church, Harrisburg, Va., on June 16.

by Becky Roth Schenck

## Ideas for Action

- Acknowledge our connections. Don't take purchases for granted. Give thanks for, and remember with prayer, those who labor to make the products we buy. Recognize the power we have as consumers.

"Do justice must become our first standard for living by which Christians make choices. Our knowledge of others' needs and our guilt must resolve itself into an everlasting attentiveness. This means being mindful, conscious, aware, so that never again can one make a decision about buying and using without thinking of the poor." (Doris Janzen Longacre, *Living More with Less*, Herald Press, 1980, pp. 25-26).

- Attempt to buy more selectively, with justice for laborers in mind, by becoming better educated about products. The following books give helpful information about corporate products and policies:

*Shopping for a Better World*, Council on Economic Priorities, P.O. Box 656, Big Bear Lake, CA 92315, 1990. Phone 714-584-1080 or outside California 1-800-848-8876.

*Add Justice to Your Shopping List*, Marilyn Helmuth Voran, Herald Press, 616 Walnut Ave., Scottdale, PA 15683-1999, 1986.

*Rating America's Corporate Conscience: A Provocative Guide to the Companies Behind the Products You Buy Every Day*, Steven Lydenberg, Council on Economic Priorities, 30 Irving Place, New York, NY 10003, (Addison-Wesley Pub. Co.), 1986. Phone 212-420-1133.

- Communicate with corporations regarding their transnational operations and employment of undocumented workers, if applicable. It is one thing to decide not to purchase particular products; it is more powerful to communicate those decisions to the corporations which produce them, explaining your reasoning.

In the process of compiling this issue, I wrote to nine garment manufacturers, both to communicate my concerns about their

transnational operations, and to see what response, if any, I would receive. I asked for the following information:

- In what countries does your corporation presently operate manufacturing plants, and how long have these plants existed?
- What is the average age of the workers you employ? Is there a minimum age a worker must be?
- What is the average workday, with regard to hours worked, breaks allowed, production required? How many hours per week does the average worker labor?
- What standards are maintained for working conditions within the factory? How many bathrooms are there per number of workers? Are there safety standards? Lighting requirements?
- What is the hourly wage paid to a beginning worker? Are there pay raises? What is the highest wage paid and upon what is it based? Are there any benefits for workers?

In six weeks, I have received a response from only one corporation, and it was largely advertising. My questions were not addressed. However, I believe we must persevere. I will write again, this time enclosing a copy of Patty's story from the Philippines. Unless consumers call corporations to accountability for their policies, we can expect "business as usual." Addresses of corporations are available in the *Standard and Poor's Register of Corporations* reference book in the public library.

- Communicate with congresspersons about the operations of transnational corporations and corporations that exploit undocumented workers. Encourage legislation to address injustices.
- Consider boycotting. Individuals acting together can make a difference. For example, in 1976, the Infant Formula Action Coalition (INFAC) was established to convince Nestle, a multinational corporation, to act more responsibly in its promotion of infant formula in developing countries. The effort began with only a handful of people, but ultimately 1 million people in 10 countries stopped buying Nestle products until the corporation changed its marketing policies.

- **Julia and Donald Martin** are new co-pastors at Mennonite Church of Normal, Ill. They will work alongside current pastor Tom Kauffman.
- **Elaine Dick** was installed in June as half-time Christian education assistant in Northview Community (MB) Church, Matsqui, B.C. She has been serving the church as an intern in women's ministries under Marj Wiebe, minister of women's ministries and counseling.
- **Kathleen Rempel** was ordained April 21 at Charleswood Mennonite Church in Winnipeg, Man. She is a chaplain at St. Boniface Hospital.

Current information about boycotting is available from Synapses, 1821 W. Cullerton, Chicago, IL 60608.

- Learn more about issues that affect poor people. Gerald Schlabach, in his book *And Who Is My Neighbor?* emphasizes that we must understand injustices as experienced by poor people in our own communities; then our understanding of global injustice will increase:

"For people to become part of the solution to poverty rather than part of the problem, many diverse things must happen. But wherever one sees hopeful signs of people making a difference, chances are that they are doing three things. They are **starting locally, making global connections, and working with others** through grassroots communities and wider networks joining them together." (pp. 119-120).

Try to join with at least one other person to study an issue, for in community we can best test our ideas, share pain, encourage hope, and strengthen our resolve to act. Some excellent books for study are:

*The Global Factory: Analysis and Action for a New Economic Era*, Rachael Kamel, American Friends Service Committee, 1501 Cherry St., Philadelphia, PA 19102-1479, 1990. Phone 215-241-7000.

*And Who Is My Neighbor?* Gerald W. Schlabach, Herald Press, 616 Walnut Ave., Scottdale, PA 15683-1999, 1990.

*Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger: A Biblical Study*, Ronald J. Sider, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL, 1977.

*Living More with Less*, Doris Janzen Longacre, Herald Press, 616 Walnut Ave., Scottdale, PA 15683-1999, 1980.

- Above all, cultivate a lifestyle that demonstrates that people and relationships are valued above material possessions.

## News and Verbs

- The Oct. 21-23 Church Leaders Conference at Bluffton (Ohio) College will focus on "**Confronting Domestic Violence and Family Abuse.**" Speakers will be Marie M. Fortune and James Leehan, both authors of books on family violence. Evening sessions will be open to the public. For information contact Randy Keeler, campus pastor at Bluffton College.
- A new **Women's Missionary and Service Commission (WMSC) Executive Committee** was confirmed at Oregon '91. New officers are: Terri Plank Brennehan of Pasadena, Calif., president; Ruth Lapp Guengerich of Hesston, Kan., vice president; Rachel Stoltzfus of Sarasota, Fla., secretary of family life; and Grace Zehr of London, Ont., secretary of literature. Marian Brendle Hostetler continues as WMSC executive secretary.
- A new **resource packet for women's groups**, "Widening the Circle Through Care," has been published jointly by Women in Mission and WMSC. The packet has 10 lessons, including topics such as ministering in conflict, the poor and homeless, aging, and family abuse.
- Mary Burkholder is new **executive secretary of Eastern Canadian Conference of the Mennonite Church**, succeeding Peter Janzen. She is pastor of Valleyview Mennonite Church in London, Ont.
- Edna Dyck is new associate editor of **Rejoice**, a devotional guide produced by Mennonite churches. She succeeds Mary Lou Cummings.
- Judy Zimmerman Herr is new **overseas peace secretary** at Mennonite Central Committee, Akron, Pa. She and her family previously served with MCC for nine years in South Africa.
- Deborah Penner has been appointed editorial assistant at the **Christian Leader**, the publication of U.S. Mennonite Brethren churches.
- Applications are being invited for Frank H. Epp Memorial Fund grants. The Fund annually distributes about \$2,500 to **support study/work projects** relating to the history of



Illustrations in this issue were drawn by Teresa Pankratz of Chicago. Please do not reproduce without permission.

minorities, peacemaking, Mennonite ecumenicity, and communication of the Christian faith. Preference is given to Mennonite and Brethren in Christ persons who are studying or working in Canada. Applications are due Nov. 15. Contact the fund, c/o Conrad Grebel College, Waterloo, ON N2L 3G6; 519-885-0220.

- After more than a two-year lull in activity, **New Call to Peacemaking** is again active. New Call is a cooperative effort of Mennonites, Friends, and Brethren to further their common peace witness. "The focus for the 90s will be broader," says Linda Peachey, a Mennonite representative

WOMEN'S CONCERNS REPORT is published bimonthly by the MCC Committee on Women's Concerns. The committee, formed in 1973, believes that Jesus Christ teaches equality of all persons. By sharing information and ideas, the committee strives to promote new relationships and corresponding supporting structures in which men and women can grow toward wholeness and mutuality. Articles and views presented in REPORT do not necessarily reflect official positions of the Committee on Women's Concerns.

WOMEN'S CONCERNS REPORT is edited by Kristina Mast Burnett. Layout by Janice Wiebe Ollenburger. Correspondence and address changes should be sent to Kristina Mast Burnett, Women's Concerns, MCC, P.O. Box 500, Akron, PA 17501-0500.

U.S. residents may send subscriptions to the above address. Canadian residents may send subscriptions to MCC Canada, 50 Kent Avenue, Kitchener, ON N2G 3R1. A donation of \$10 per year per subscription is suggested.

*This newsletter is printed on recycled paper.*

on the new steering committee. "It will include not only military violence, but also domestic violence, economic injustice, and racism."

- Voices for Nonviolence is a new MCC program in **Manitoba to help Mennonites deal with domestic abuse**. The program will provide consultation services for pastors and others working with abusers and victims; support for abusers, victims and families; and education for churches. Director is Heather Block.
- The issue of domestic violence is presented through music, storytelling, dance, and spoken word in "**Never Again, Shattering the Darkness**," a presentation that has been made in various Ontario locations. The program is sponsored by MCC Ontario Peace and Social Committee and MCC Canada Women's Concerns.
- Goshen College seeks applicants for the position of **Director of Multicultural Center**, beginning as early as January 1992. The assignment includes education of majority students and assisting minority students in becoming fully integrated into campus and community life. The college welcomes applications from women and minorities. For information write to Norman Kauffman, Dean of Students, Goshen College, Goshen, IN 46526.

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